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# Understanding Asexuality

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# UNDER STAND ING ASEXUALITY

One student shares her experience as an “ace”

BY RACHEL VIPOND DESIGN ALIXANDRIA COLLINS

Anna\* is asexual. “Ha ha, like an amoeba!” is one of the common ones I hear,” she says.

That is, Anna, a junior in English and technical communications, doesn’t experience sexual attraction. Asexuality is often written off as a joke or even a phase—but it’s a sexual orientation with which many identify. So what specifically does asexual mean, and what’s it like to be asexual on campus?

One thing that many fail to realize, Anna points out, is that there is a split between romantic and sexual orientation. One may be asexual and experience romantic attraction to another person and vice versa. The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) website explains that asexual people may still enter romantic relationships, even marry. Their sexual orientation should not be confused for a lack of interest in personal relationships.

Before discovering her identity as asexual, Anna says that she would think to herself, “I’m still in that phase where I think love is gross and boys are gross and it’s just taking way longer to get out of it.” It turns out that this wasn’t the case.

“Eventually you start to realize, ‘No, everyone else isn’t like this, it’s me that’s different.’”

Eventually, Anna says, she stumbled across the term and its definition on the internet and “it was like a lightning bolt.”

Coming out as asexual allowed Anna to stop seeing a problem with herself, she explains, “After you find the term you realize that you thought you were broken before and never quite realized.”

Some assume that telling others you simply don’t experience sexual attraction might be easier than coming out as gay or bisexual, but coming out as asexual is no easier than coming out as another orientation. Misconceptions make coming out to family difficult for Anna, who once tested the waters with a family member. She listed a few sexualities, and when she got to asexuality, Anna explains, things went sour.

“She was like, ‘What, like you want to have sex with yourself? That’s disgusting,’ and I was like, ‘I’m never talking about that again.’”

But what about the American Dream of a spouse, kids and a picket fence? The expectation that this is everyone’s goal can cause some tension for asexuals, especially if the expectation is coming from close family and friends.

“I’m from such a conservative Christian family, where it’s like, ‘You can’t have sex, you can’t have sex,’ and as soon as I don’t want to it’s like, ‘What?!’”

When her parents push the issue of finding a boyfriend, Anna mentions her plans to live with friends after college. Her future roommates

are asexual—a fact unknown by her parents, who assume they’ll get married eventually, possibly leaving Anna with the desire to follow suit.

The pressure to get married, or just to find love, is everywhere: billboards, TV, movies, the plot of most teen novels.

“It’s so rare to find something that says you don’t have to do that, or that there can be a story without that,” says Anna.

Anna’s dream for the future doesn’t include romance, but it does include friends and script writing for comic books, cartoons or video games. Realistically, she notes, she’ll probably use her technical communications major to write reports for physicists, but she says she’ll be happy either way.

Asexuality is the “A” at the end of the LGBTQIA acronym—though in some cases people consider “Allies” the “A.” This sets the tone for Anna’s experience with the LGBTQIA community.

“You have all these LGBTQIA spaces, the gay clubs, the gay pride parades, and they’re all so inherently sexualized and 21+,” she says, “That’s almost less of a safe place for me than straight people, which is really weird because straight people are not that safe.”

Anna says one issue she runs into is a gatekeeping mentality in the LGBTQIA community that might reject her for being “not quite queer enough.” Coincidentally, she says she feels she has much more of a place in the queer community, which AVEN defines as one for anyone who “differs from the norm.”

Asexuality makes its way into very little pop culture, and when it does, it is often ambiguous. “Most of what we do is squint at the characters and say ‘if you look really hard, they haven’t been in a romantic relationship yet, they could be!’” Uses of the actual word “asexual” are even more rare, and in some cases it is used incorrectly, as a way to say a character is “sexually lifeless,” says Anna.

There are a few notable occurrences of asexual, or “ace” characters in television, including a character in the comedy *Sirens* who uses the term “asexual” to describe herself. *Game of Thrones*’ Lord Varys remarks that he “desires neither” men nor women. Anna says she’s happy about the recognition, but *Game of Thrones* is hypersexual by nature, and she doesn’t plan to watch it just for this one mention.

Education may be a step toward stopping the invalidation of this orientation. Basically, Anna explains, asexuals aren’t broken and don’t need to be fixed.

“It’s kind of like trying to explain to a colorblind person ‘Maybe you just haven’t found the right color yet’, and it doesn’t work like that.” 📧

\*name has been changed

## GLOSSARY

(COURTESY OF ASEXUALITY.ORG)

### ASEXUAL

Someone who does not experience sexual attraction.

### AROMANTIC

Someone who does not experience romantic attraction.

### ATTRACTION

In this context, it refers to a mental or emotional force that draws people together. Asexuals do not experience sexual attraction, but some feel other types of attraction.

### AESTHETIC ATTRACTION

Attraction to someone’s appearance, without it being romantic or sexual.

### DEMISEXUAL

Someone who can only experience sexual attraction after an emotional bond has been formed. This bond does not have to be romantic in nature.

### GRAY-ASEXUAL

Someone who identifies with the area between asexuality and sexuality, for example because they experience sexual attraction very rarely, only under specific circumstances, or of an intensity so low that it’s ignorable.

### ROMANTIC ATTRACTION

Desire of being romantically involved with another person.

### SENSUAL ATTRACTION

Desire to have physical non-sexual contact with someone else, like affectionate touching.

### SEXUAL ATTRACTION:

Desire to have sexual contact with someone else, to share your sexuality with them.